

GORGAS HOSPITAL, MORTUARY AND CHAPEL  
(Gorgas Hospital, Building 257)  
Gorgas Road  
Balboa Heights Vicinity  
Former Panama Canal Zone  
Republic of Panama

HABS No. CZ-11-F

HABS  
CZ  
1-BALH.V  
IF-

# PHOTOGRAPHS

## WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

### HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY

National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Intermountain Field Area  
Rocky Mountain System Support Office  
12795 West Alameda Parkway  
Post Office Box 25287  
Denver, Colorado 80225-0287

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
GORGAS HOSPITAL, MORTUARY AND CHAPEL  
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For information about other structures at Gorgas Hospital, see:

HABS No. CZ-11	GORGAS HOSPITAL
HABS No. CZ-11-A	ADMINISTRATION AND CLINICS (Building 237)
HABS No. CZ-11-B	KITCHEN AND MESS (Building 238)
HABS No. CZ-11-C	SHOPS AND BOILER HOUSE (Buildings 240 and 240A)
HABS No. CZ-11-D	ISOLATION WARD (Building 242)
HABS No. CZ-11-E	SECTIONS A AND B (Buildings 255 and 253)
HABS No. CZ-11-G	SECTION O (Obstetrical Building, Building 261)
HABS No. CZ-11-H	MAIN STAIRS AND PASSAGEWAYS

Location: Gorgas Road, Balboa Heights, Former Panama Canal Zone, Republic of Panama

Present Owner: United States Department of Defense

Original Use: Mortuary and Chapel

Present Use: Mortuary and Chapel for USA MEDDAC-Panama

Significance: Building 257, constructed in 1941-1942 as a mortuary, is significant for its architecture which is compatible in style and materials with the 1915-1919 era architecture to which it is associated in function and site. It is also significant for its role within American healthcare and lifeways in the former Panama Canal Zone.

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### A. General Statement:

#### 1. History:

The Mortuary and Chapel was designed in 1948 by Meade Bolton, Panama Canal architect, to provide space for pathological and undertaking services. The original crematory constructed in 1916 was attached to the Board of Health Laboratory, a 1916 permanent hospital complex structure on Gorgas Road. The demolition of the old crematory provided space for what was described in the *Report of the Health Department of the Panama Canal* for 1941 as an additional laboratory building to the south of the Board of Health Laboratory. The Mortuary and Chapel was constructed by the Panama Canal Company's Department of Operation and Maintenance.

The *Report of the Health Department of the Panama Canal* in 1941 provides a description of the proposed reinforced concrete structure that was connected to the Board of Health Laboratory by a second story passageway over an access road that ran between the two buildings. The account notes that the basement floor would be used for the storage of caskets and coffins, a two-retort crematory, and the machinery for the first floor cold storage plant. The first floor contained an undertaker's office, a viewing room, the chapel, a receiving and shipping room, and a cold storage room sufficient in size to hold 21 bodies. The second floor contained an embalming room, autopsy room, a laboratory workroom and office for the pathologist, and a large room for the clerical personnel and pathology department files. A large centrally located elevator accessed all floors. The cost of constructing the building through 1942 was \$210,000 but the elevator and crematory retorts were still not complete. The 1942 Report of the Health Department of the Panama Canal indicates that the installation of the crematory was not initially satisfactory and that wartime conditions would forestall the crematory's reconstruction. After construction, the building remained in the possession of the Panama Canal Company until it was transferred to the Department of Defense in 1979 in accordance with the Panama Canal Treaty of 1977.

#### 2. Architectural Character:

The Mortuary and Chapel building, designed as an annex to the adjacent Laboratory building, has a shallow setback from Gorgas Road that accommodates a sidewalk. Bolton, the Mortuary's architect, produced a smaller, distilled version of its companion building replete with first story paired window arches, an entry arch with decorative concrete molding, and a tripartite and paired

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window arrangement in the front upper story bays. A concrete balustraded balcony lies below the paired windows in the center bay.

The building's fabric is in good condition and is well preserved. Modifications appear to be confined to the fenestration and doorways. The original front elevation windows within the arches have been replaced with fixed windows with sheets of plate glass and the main doorway has been infilled with concrete and modern glass double doors. The original entry grills are intact and the cast iron lamps that abut the main entry are original. The rear elevation's fenestration has also changed with modern replacement windows and added fans placed within window openings. The continued use of the building as a Mortuary and Chapel has helped to preserve the interior plan and room finishes which are fairly well preserved.

### B. Description of the Exterior:

#### 1. Overall Dimensions:

The Mortuary is a rectangular, three story building with a basement, a square central penthouse, and a small L-shaped mezzanine between its first and second floors over the Cold Storage area and Dressing Room. It contains 6,500 square feet. The building measures 50' across the front and is 65' deep and has a total area of 6,500 square feet. The penthouse floor measures 13' by 13' and the mezzanine that embraces the columbarium (a niche intended to receive cremated human remains) measures 30'8" in length and 17'9" deep. The passageway between the Laboratory and the Mortuary is 28'4" in length and 5'3" in width. The basement floor is 12' in height, and the first and second floors are 16'9" and 12'6" high, respectively.

#### 2. Foundations:

Foundations are constructed of poured-in place reinforced concrete.

#### 3. Walls:

Exterior walls and structural columns are constructed of reinforced concrete. Details include dripstone courses and decorative concrete molding in arches.

4. Structural System:

The structural system is a reinforced concrete system, non-load bearing partition walls are concrete block. The roof system is a wood truss and floors are reinforced concrete slabs.

5. Porches, Exterior stairs:

The northeast ground floor corner has a recessed loading platform supported by a corner column and protected on each open side by a standing seam metal hood supported by concrete brackets. The concrete platform is vented on the north side of the building and a loading dock with a ramp is attached to the east side of the platform.

6. Chimneys:

A concrete interior chimney is located on the north side of the building, 52'5" above the finished first floor level.

7. Openings:

a. Doors:

The main entry is formal, recessed within an oversize archway that is decoratively molded. The upper portion of the arch has been infilled with concrete over the doors and modern double glass doors added. Concrete steps lead to the main entry from the street and the steps have a metal balustrade and railing that is curved at the base. A secondary doorway located on the north elevation is also contained within an open archway that is similar in treatment. Each of these arches were originally open but a set of rectangular wrought iron grill gates helped keep these main entries secure. Both original grills are in place. A third entry on the rear elevation platform on the loading platform has a double door and a small rectangular access door for coffin delivery.

b. Windows:

The front elevation windows within the paired arches are replacement windows. The basement windows are screened and have security grills. The upper story double hung sash windows have 12 lights, preserving the look of the original fenestration. The windows on the side elevations are similarly treated with modern replacement windows on the first floor and double hung sash 12

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light type windows on the upper story where window air-conditioning units are placed. Few original casement windows are still in place. The rear elevation features three, central, first story windows with 15 lights; separate rectangular windows are located above each larger window. The latter contain 12 lights. This group of windows appears to be original. However, a large fan has been placed within one of the transom-like windows with a concrete surround and an adjacent small window has been infilled with concrete. Small, rectangular, fixed, clerestory windows are located in the penthouse tower.

### 8. Roof:

#### a. Shape and Materials:

The Mortuary has a hipped on gable Spanish tile roof with projecting eaves. A pyramidal Spanish tile roof covers the "penthouse."

#### b. Skylights, Vents

Two skylights are located on the northeast and northwest side of the roof adjacent to the rear hip, allowing more natural light into the upper floor rooms.

### C. Description of the Interior:

#### 1. Floor Plans:

The original plans for all floors are fairly intact and are shown in detail on the architectural drawings. The building is essentially divided into two broad use areas by the stairway elevator and central corridor. The front area contains public space; the area behind the elevator and stair case is private and is devoted to undertaking tasks. The basement plan is well-preserved with coffin storage along the front elevation and the crematory equipment at the rear of the building. Changes to the first floor include the conversion of the original viewing room into an office. The Chapel has been partitioned to accommodate an office along the front and the remainder of the space is now used as a Viewing Room. The mezzanine which contains the columbarium is in place. The second floor plan is intact with rooms once devoted to Pathology and Clerical desks now used as offices and storage.

2. Stairways:

The staircase is concrete with a wooden railing and balustrade and provides access to all floors.

3. Flooring:

The public spaces and offices on the first floor are carpeted while the shipping and receiving room and columbarium have a "steel trowelled integral cement finish with floor hardener" as reported on the Finish Schedule on the as built. The mezzanine floor was finished with red quarry tile. The second story floors in the autopsy and embalming rooms are red quarry tile; the other primary rooms were originally tiled but are now carpeted. The basement floor is concrete.

4. Walls and Ceiling Finishes:

The office area on the first floor has dropped ceilings with acoustical tiles; walls are concrete with a cement wash. The first story central hall also has an acoustical tile ceiling. The Viewing Room has concrete walls with a concrete wash, the original suspended plaster ceiling with six brass and steel hanging light fixtures and crown molding. The Receiving Room has concrete walls and ceilings with a wash. Ducts and pipes are suspended from the ceiling. Walls in the mezzanine area and columbarium are also concrete. Second story walls and ceilings are concrete with a concrete wash and plaster ceilings. Only the baths have a 3/4 wall glazed tile finish with upper concrete walls and ceilings. The basement floor has concrete walls with a concrete wash and ceilings.

5. Openings:

Doors:

Wood panel interior doors are original to the building and they appear along with modern replacements on the first story. Wooden, floor to ceiling, roll up doors separate the Autopsy Room from the Embalming Room.

Windows:

No distinctive interior windows or interior window hardware noted.

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### 6. Decorative Features and Trim:

The Mortuary contains an interior metal grill in the main first story corridor. This rectangular gate defines the public space on the first floor; it is a later addition following the general design of the original entry grills. The Viewing Room which has six original light fixtures and crown molding has a recessed alcove on its east wall. The simple alcove is outlined in small green-grey ceramic tile and is lit from the interior. Built in cabinets appear in the first story stairwell, second story front rooms and in storage areas.

The Receiving and Shipping Room is fitted with counters and soapstone sinks. Its south wall is devoted to cold storage, with three levels of steel refrigerator doors. Gauges monitoring the system hang from a cross beam. The metal wall ladder to the L-shaped columbarium, the glass and frame cabinet doors designated for the storage of cremated remains, and the rounded bronze railing are still intact. The Autopsy and Embalming Rooms feature a number of original details including built-in cabinetry with glass fronts and open storage, counters with soapstone sinks, shades for skylights, and ceramic and steel tables. The rooms are divided by wooden roll up doors. Above the roll up doors in the Autopsy Room, rolled anatomical charts are mounted in a wooden case. The charts date to the 1940s.

### 7. Hardware:

None noted.

### 8. Mechanical Equipment:

The Mortuary is fitted with a Washburn and Granger, Inc. crematory incinerator made in New York which works on a hydraulic system. A modern crematory acquired in 1986 sits beside the older model.

#### a. Heating and Air Conditioning:

The building has central air conditioning.



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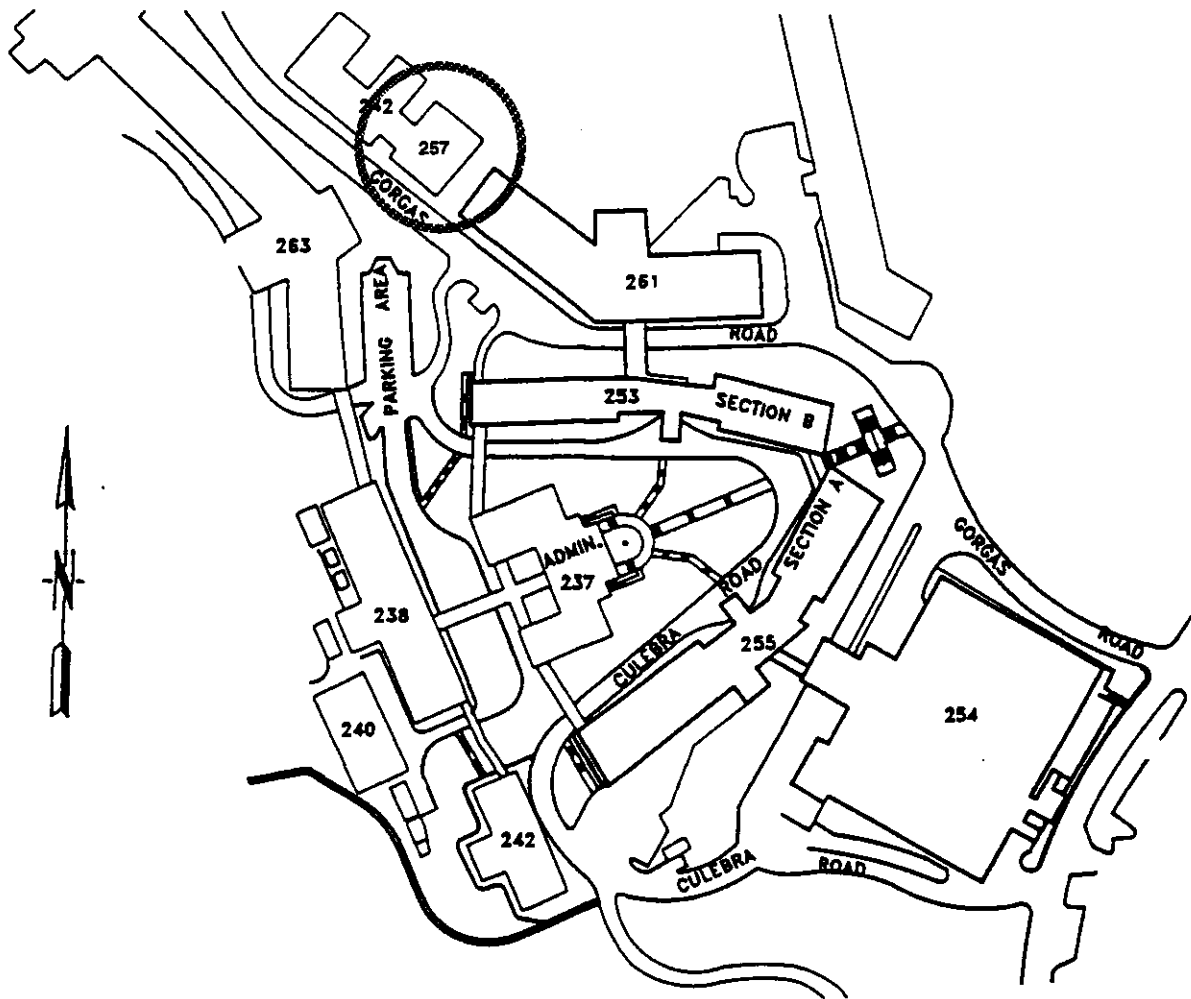


Figure 1 Map, 1996 (original located at Real Property Office, Corozal).  
Mapmaker unknown.  
GORGAS ARMY HOSPITAL COMPLEX

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b. Lighting:

The building's lighting is mostly modern with hanging fixtures and recessed lighting. The hanging metal light fixtures in the chapel appear to be original.

c. Plumbing Fixtures:

Plumbing fixtures are modern.

d. Conveyance System:

A large, 9'10' by 10'2" elevator that opens on two sides is centrally located.

9. Original Furnishings:

None noted.

D. Site:

1. General Setting and Orientation:

The Mortuary faces southwest towards Ancon Hill and fronts directly onto Gorgas Road with a shallow setback that allows space for a narrow sidewalk. It is built slightly above street level. A driveway is situated next to its north elevation that leads to a small rear parking area. The passageway to its companion building, the Laboratory, now occupied by the Smithsonian Institute, on the second floor was not accessible.

2. Historic Landscape Design:

None identified. Two royal palms are planted along the front elevation of the building.

3. Outbuildings:

A concrete garage with a metal roof that can accommodate two hearses is located at the rear.